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WHY WE WRITE THE WAY WE DO: A STUDY OF COMPOSITION TEACHING THROUGH WRITING STYLE TRANSLATION

BY YUEMIN HE, PHD

As a college English composition instructor, I have come across frustrated student writers in the following situation: We advise them to write in the third-person voice, but we also say they certainly can write in the first-person voice. After all, we add, their writings should represent their own voices. Then when they write the way they talk, we say their vocabulary is too colloquial, and their style, too casual. But when they switch to the big words, their writing is accused of being rigid and awkward. With such seemingly self-contradictory messages, our students often feel puzzled and wonder what they should do.

*“Writing is communication;
it is not dancing solo
...whether a piece of writing
is effective (depends) on how
well the writing responds
to the specifics of the
audience’s situation, and
speaks to their concerns.”*

Writing is communication; it is not dancing solo. We all know that whether a piece of writing is effective in facilitating communication depends, to a large extent, on how well the writing responds to the specifics of the audience’s situation, and speaks to their concerns. These specifics can include the audience’s education, personal interests, social status, etc. For example, if the audience demands a more intimate relationship with the writer, then a first-person voice usually sounds more amiable than a third-person voice, and a more colloquial and informal vocabulary helps shorten the distance between the audience and the writer. But if the audience feels more comfortable with a less personal atmosphere, then a more formal diction and a third-person voice will be more effective. Our students who are puzzled often fail to take their audience into full consideration – they often think they write for us professors, which is true, but only partly true – and fail to respond to the particular expectations of their audience, who are often ignored or barely there.

I use translation in the classroom to increase awareness of audience importance and help them understand that, as writers, they have the choice of which audience to address, but they also have the responsibility to speak to the needs and preferences of their chosen audience. However, the translation suggested is not translation in the usual sense; it is not translation between languages. Instead, it is translation from an informal writing style to a formal writing style, and vice versa. This “style translation” can help students become more sensitive to their rhetorical situations

and learn to work with varied styles, as you will see in the following account of my classroom experiences.

Let me start with a reading assignment that I gave to my freshman composition students. It's Amy Tan's 1990 *Threepenny Review* essay, "Mother Tongue" – a sample text often anthologized for teaching the classification and division essay. As a national bestselling novelist who believes in the power of language, Tan classifies the English that she utilizes in her life into four kinds. She summarizes them up as "the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as 'simple'; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as 'broken'; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as 'watered down'; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure" (332-33). The ultimate purpose of the text, as Tan admits, is "to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her [the mother's] intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts" (333). Evidently, Tan aims to declare that she writes novels for readers like her own mother.

After my students finished the preliminary reading, after we covered other bases, such as the author's background, the status of *Threepenny Review*, and difficult vocabulary, and when it was time for me to highlight the importance of the audience analysis and the power of style translation, I asked my students to re-read the following paragraphs in which Tan recalls one instance during which her Chinese American mother's "broken" English limited her mother's possibilities in life:

When I was fifteen, she [Tan's mother] used to have me call people on the phone to pretend I was she. In this guise, I was forced to ask for information or even to complain and yell at people who had been rude to her. One time it was a call to her stockbroker in New York. She had cashed out her small portfolio and it just so happened we were going to go to New York the next week, our very first trip outside California. I had to get on the phone and say in an adolescent voice that was not very convincing, "This is Mrs. Tan."

And my mother was standing in the back whispering loudly, "Why he don't send me check, already two weeks late. So mad he lie to me, losing me money. And then I said in perfect English, "Yes, I'm getting rather concerned. You had agreed to send the check two weeks ago, but it hasn't arrived."

Then she began to talk more loudly. "What he want, I come to New York tell him front of his boss, you cheating me?" And I was trying to calm her down, make her be quiet, while telling the stockbroker, "I can't tolerate any more excuses. If I don't receive the check immediately, I am going to have to speak to your manager when I'm in New York next week." And sure enough, the following week there we were in front of this astonished stockbroker, and I was sitting there red-faced and quiet, and my mother, the real Mrs. Tan, was shouting at his boss in her impeccable broken English.

My students were animated: Some responded by laughing, enjoying the humor Tan had created and being tickled by the dramatic effect Tan's mother's English embodied. Others, who were more likely to be second language English speakers or had similar life experiences, also laughed. They laughed to join Tan's celebration of the victory over the stockbroker, and they also provided other examples in which children have helped their parents overcome the disadvantages incurred by language deficiency. While the students were still excited, I took the chance to ask why Tan was able to deal with the stockbroker while her mother could not.

My students were very analytical and eloquent:

"Her mother's English is bad. The stockbroker does not understand her."

"The mother should learn to speak better English. Man, she is in America."

"The stockbroker thought the mother was dumb, did not care to talk to her."

"Her English is so broken. Even if she had reported to the manager, the stockbroker could have used her bad English as an excuse and claim he did not know what she wanted and he could get away with it. Hey, that's why he dared to ignore her."

"Tan spoke formally, so when she said she was going to report the case to the manager, the stockbroker probably scared."

"I don't want to be that child. It is kind of embarrassing."

I saw the opportunity to step in. I made sure that I underscored several facts: First, in reporting her mother's requests to the stockbroker, Tan translated her mother's "broken" oral English into a formal style of English. Second, in doing the translation, Tan displayed her acute awareness that she and her mother were combating a bureaucratic stockbroker, who shunned his responsibility by taking advantage of her mother's inability to articulate legitimate requests in the English expected in a business setting. In other words, Tan knew that her mother failed to switch from an informal style of English to a formal style of English according to the circumstances, so she made sure she succeeded in making the transformation. Third, Tan showed that she knew that people tend to judge a book by its cover, and they often equal the quality of a speaker's speech with the quality of the speaker's education and intelligence, thereby providing the kind of services the speaker "deserves."

Now, I asked my students, was Tan's translation crucial to speaking effectively and to achieving her goal of helping her mother out?

As expected, my students answered yes. Then I moved on to marveling at how interesting, how subtle, and how effective that Tan had utilized three, not two, writing styles of English – her mother’s *Chinglish* style, the stockbroker’s business style, and her own first-person narrative style that dominates the bulk of the essay – in the same essay, where she discusses the four kinds of English that have characterized her life experiences. I ended by calling Tan’s style a mixed one, one that her particular writing situation – for mothers like her own mother and for the readers of *Threepenny Review*, an “original” literary magazine that “pitched at the general literary reader” and strived to publish “interesting, high-quality criticism, reflection, argument, fiction, and poetry” (Franzen and Zagajewski).

Since my students had observed how style translation was done and made use of in Tan’s daily life and literary writing, I decided to provide them with some hands-on experience in doing style translation. I found the opportunity when we were studying Terry McMillan’s essay “Easing My Heart Inside” as a sample text for writing cause-and-effect essays.

In the essay, McMillan shares the experiences of how she became a writer, and what it means to be a writer. She writes effusively that she had a mother who encouraged her to aspire to high achievement, and she found writing to be her calling. Given her topic, she uses the first-person narration and includes many informal words, unconventional syntactic structures, and idiomatic phrases that we professors usually do not allow or do not encourage our students to use. For instance, she writes:

This writing *stuff* saved me. It has become my way of responding to and dealing with *things* I find too disturbing or distressing or painful to handle in any other way. It’s safe. Writing is my shelter. I don’t hide behind the words; I use them to *dig inside* my heart to find the truth. I guess I can say, honestly, that writing also offers me a kind of patience I don’t have in my ordinary day-to-day life. It makes me stop. It makes me take note. It affords me a kind of sanctuary that I can’t get in my hurried and *full-to-the-brim-with-activity* life.

Besides that, I’m selfish. And self-absorbed. But I’ve discovered that writing makes me less so. It has made me more compassionate. In fact, that’s what I’ve always prayed for: to have more compassion. For everybody. I’ve learned that every human being has feelings, despite the fact that sometimes I have my doubts and people think no one understands how they feel and that no one could possibly feel the same way. It’s simply not true. *Shock shock shock*.

I’m also *nosy*. And I want to understand why I do some of the things I do and why *we’re so stupid*, and in order to come close to empathizing I had to learn how to *get under someone else’s skin*. Writing has become my under.

All the highlighted parts in the above passage prompted my students to ask questions: “Why could McMillan get published at all writing this way, using taboo words like *stupid*, unclear references like *stuff*, *things*, and *under*.”

To help the students understand what “legitimizes” McMillan’s style, after they understood the text generally in meaning, I put the students in small groups and asked them to translate these paragraphs from McMillan’s informal style into a formal style and use a third-person voice. The following is the final version that we agreed upon based on the groups’ work:

Writing saved her. It has become her way of responding to and dealing with *the world* she finds too disturbing or distressing or painful to handle in any other way. It’s safe. Writing is her shelter. She doesn’t hide behind the words; she uses them to *understand* herself and find the truth. She guesses she can say, honestly, that writing also offers her a kind of patience she doesn’t have in her ordinary day-to-day life. It makes her stop. It makes her take note. It affords her a kind of sanctuary that she can’t get in her hurried and *hectic* life.

Besides that she was selfish. And self-absorbed. But she has discovered that writing makes her less so. It has made her more compassionate. In fact, that’s what she has always prayed for: to have more compassion. For everybody. She has learned that every human being has feelings, despite the fact that sometimes she has her doubts and people think no one understands how they feel and that no one could possibly feel the same way. It’s simply not true. *This realization is very shocking indeed.*

She is very *curious*. And she wants to understand why she does some of the things she does and why we’re so *naïve*, and in order to come close to empathizing she had learn how to understand other people. Writing has become her *means to understanding*.

Next, I asked my students to compare and contrast this translation with the original and consider what their differences are and why McMillan chooses to use the informal version. Below are some responses I received:

“It [the original] makes the text easier to relate to.”

“The translation sounds like a report, does not sound like she [McMillan] is writing.”

“The original version sounds natural to me though I don’t know why.”

“Doesn’t the translation sound more serious?”

So after another round of discussion, the students decided that the translated version does not work as well as the original for several reasons: 1) The voice becomes unnatural, fake, uninteresting, distant, and insincere. 2) Though the translation

keeps most of the information, it has lost significantly the affective effect of the original text. 3) The author is not there anymore.

Finally, I asked my students why it was so important that the voice has to be interesting, intimate, personal, and sincere. The students answered with a rhetorical question, “Otherwise how could the audience believe McMillan’s words?” Again, I stepped in: I agreed that it is crucial that authors build a rapport with their audiences, sound genuine, and behave professionally. I especially emphasized that this concern is particularly relevant to McMillan’s case given she was writing as an authority, a much celebrated African American author, for *Why I Write: Thoughts on the Craft of Fiction* (1998), a book that would be read mostly by young aspiring writers, who needed the support, camaraderie, and experience from the writing community, esp. from the more established writers.

Eventually, from this three-step translation activity, my students learned that McMillan’s audience justifies her use of the narrative voice “I” as well as the seemingly informal vocabulary. Translation taught my student writers to become very audience sensitive and they came to know the way to construct a proper ethos for a given rhetorical situation via wise choice of diction, style, and persona.

By that time, the lesson about audience analysis was very much rooted into the consciousness of my students. Therefore when we came to learn Carolyn Foster Segal’s humorous text, “The Dog Ate My Disk, and Other Tales of Woe,” I seemed to be the one that underestimated my student writers.

Segal wrote the essay for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2000, and for an audience that included her fellow educators. Her purpose was to share and release frustration over, rather than look for a quick fix to, the problem that her college students often found excuses for not turning in their assignments on time. She also lamented that the students’ excuses were becoming more and more creative and ridiculous as technology advanced and was utilized by her students. In the essay, her humor indeed sometimes borders on sarcasm.

I was worried that the students would feel uncomfortable reading a text that criticizes students, who could easily be themselves. I was nervous about how to explain why the editor of the textbook selected Segal’s essay for classroom use. I was afraid that I would leave them the impression that I enjoyed the humor at their expense.

But my anxiety was uncalled for: My students understood there was some truth in the humorous scenarios presented in Segal’s text. They did not take the humor and sarcasm personally. And they regarded Segal as a sensitive, fun writer.

Now it’s time that I end this essay with another case.

Right after I posted the grades at the end of last semester, I received an email from one student:

Hello, Dr. He:

i was just wondering that what was my grade in the final essay. i just

don't understand how come i got a C. i was really expecting a B. Please explain it to me. Thank u..i will be waiting for your reply.

I responded that I would be glad to give the student a breakdown of his grade if he could translate his request into proper English.

He picked up the cue and here is his translation of his pre-college, buddy-note into a budding college student email:

Hello, Dr. He:

I hope you are doing great. I am sorry for the improper english earlier; it is just that i was in a rush. I would really appreciate it if you would tell me my final essay grade. Also, it will be very helpful if you tell me exactly what kept me from getting a B. I was even exempt from the final so that increased my chances for getting a B. Did i do that horrible in the final essay?

Thank you.

There were still sleeping I's and dethroned English, but I believe the student will continue to translate and transform himself as he strives to become a more mature and promising student writer.

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